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# The African Concept of Personhood and its Relevance to Respect for Human Life and Dignity in Africa and the Global Context

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## THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF *PERSONHOOD* AND ITS RELEVANCE TO RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE AND DIGNITY IN AFRICA AND THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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**ABSTRACT** In the current context of dynamic changes in all aspects of life, Africa is besieged by many challenges that require home-made solutions. One of the most outstanding challenges that the continent faces is the overwhelming negation and neglect of some of the indigenous knowledge systems that would offer great and long lasting building blocks for the diverse communities. Besides, Africa remains a by-the-way in most crucial global issues; a consumer (willing or unwilling) of formulations and inventions that lack in relevance and support to the local contexts. This is due to lack of the appreciation of the fact that the continent, with the abundance in its social and cultural formulation through the ages has what it takes to define and redefine the world in ways that are positive and human enhancing. It is in this regard that the concept of *Personhood* stands out as offering us the central locus in all dealings; a concept that cannot be limited to the modern forms of disciplines as studies and taught at the different formal institutions, but rather, lived and experienced; offering us a foundation upon which we can build answers to the questions that confront the continent for its posterity.

**Key Words:** *Personhood*; Identity; Communalism; Culture.

### INTRODUCTION

We all struggle to find the meaning of being human. In this struggle, there are different attempts that aim at defining *Personhood*: biological, anthropological, religious, psychological, and others. From the African viewpoint, there are culturally<sup>(1)</sup> centred definitions that define the attributes of the human person (being) in clear terms. These terms have inherent values in them that if applied, would interrogate and inform current local and global ethics, especially the value we attach to life, beyond existence. In fact, it is possible to argue that *Personhood* qualifies one to be human only in the context of socialization<sup>(2)</sup> (the process of transmitting human culture) and enculturation<sup>(3)</sup> (the process of transmitting a particular culture).

But, in our attempt to appreciate *Personhood* in the African context, we are assailed by the many claims that beleaguer most 'African' claims. For example, what should be considered 'African' about *Personhood* that cannot be claimed by any human society of the world? If there was such a concept as *Personhood*, how can we account for lack of dignity for human life—we are all the time confronted by the bad news from Africa: failed states, coups, famine, bad governance with it attendant outcomes, etc. Isn't talk of *Personhood* in Africa

more of an attempt to domesticate, or even, an overzealous attempt to create or ring fence a rather universal concept?

Indeed this may be a universal concept, but in our discussion, we shall see how in the African conception, *Personhood* is all that forms the basis for morality and value-systems in the society; whereby *Personhood* may go beyond the natural world into the supernatural, which world (supernatural) is conceived as a duplicate of the material life we live on earth.

While it is clear that there is no homogeneity in as far as African culture is concerned, and language being part of culture, the different terms that define *Personhood* have an inherent value in them that defy common parlance and straddle community limits. The concept of the human person is therefore encapsulated in the thoughts and actions of the African peoples, thereby giving credence to human relationships, shaping and determining the relationships in ways that cherish and value life-supporting and positive transformative efforts in building human societies, irrespective of gender, race and religion. It is therefore our contention that critical to African review of her present and future engagement in the global affairs is this age-long concept that she would need to reflect upon and propose to her present state and to the world at large. This is because of the peace and human security concerns on the continent arising out of the governance and democratic principles deficits experienced, together with the onslaught of the international community especially in the areas of trade and commerce which relegate Africa to the so-called 'Developing Economies' which are characterised by endemic poverty, political instability, corruption, together with the sickness and disease burdens.

It is the right understanding and appreciation of *Personhood*, it is argued in the presentation, which will restore human dignity and value for life and all that pertains to it. We shall apply the concept to question both the physical and mental barriers that limit cooperation and working for the common good among modern communities. We shall build on the African philosophy of '*I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am*'<sup>(4)</sup> to strengthen the argument for a communal perspective that works for the establishment of the community of persons without borders; a community that works for and seeks the wellbeing of others. This is a community that considers both barriers and boundaries as limiting to cooperation and collaboration in the context of a global world; a world of equal opportunities that seeks to correct the long-standing ideological and economic categories of 'rich' and 'poor,' 'developed' and 'developing' (or 'less developed'). This is a world that does not consider its interests at the expense of others, a form of either neglect or marginalisation. In fact, Mbiti (1970) states it as a matter of fact that:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and the relatives whether dead or

alive... The individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (Mbiti, 1970).

We shall further interrogate some of the cultural values related to gender segregation and roles; together with the kinship ties from the family to the ethnic or national identities. In this, we shall seek to inquire whether what essentially defines *Personhood* is related to these 'convenient identities' that divide rather than unite humanity.

In the conclusion, we shall seek to establish interventions where modern day social, economic and political constructs (paradigms) contradict and are not supportive of *Personhood*. Our proposals will be based on the essential relationships between national, regional and international regimes and the local/indigenous values that assert human values of dignified living as members of the world, not bound by nationality, race or creed. With emphasis on raising both individual and community perspectives of *Personhood* and its attendant values, we shall seek a re-assertion of the universality of our humanness, thereby advocating for humane relationships that enhance potential for human growth and development that seeks the good of others above limited interests.

### *PERSONHOOD*: THE CONCEPT

*Personhood* in this case seeks to navigate the common concepts that are usually definitive; concepts like 'human being,' 'human person,' 'person,' 'humanity,' and the common generic term 'man.' The greatest challenge we encounter in the discussion of *Personhood* has to do with language which is not necessarily born in Africa. It is the language, and I dare say, languages from foreign lands have dominated the minds of many in Africa. With the onslaught on the African culture, language has been forced to shift and so the thought-patterns. This directly affects the categorization of life in all its aspects. For example, 'riches' today are defined in terms of material acquisition and accumulation, whereas in most societies in Africa, good relationships implied a good life of rest and satisfaction. In this context, 'riches' implied an extensive establishment of both natural and supernatural relationships with the living, the dead and the eco-system (which was considered as having life).

However, beyond these, we shall seek to establish the African understanding of the essential nature of *Personhood*. This we will do in order to interrogate the African value of human life and dignity. We shall ask the question: What is the understanding of *Personhood* in the African context, and how does this understanding influence value for human life and dignity? Is what we see played out on the continent a reflection of the African understanding of *Personhood*?

Our interest in the concept 'Personhood' seeks to establish the essential meaning and nature of all that is implied by the term in a modern day context, deriving much from the cultural perspectives. However, our interest hinges on the fact

that humanity is at the centre of life and existence, and as part of the greater humanity, it is the value that we attach to every individual that spreads out to make us revere life in general.

According to the African cosmology, the universe is an interrelated complex of both natural and supernatural beings. This is a reality that we cannot dichotomize due to the influence of especially the invisible world upon the visible one. Things that are experienced through the natural senses have another level of the supernatural senses. To such belief, life and existence is not limited to the physical being but rather, being-the reality that is not limited to sensory levels.

One of the important observations to make is that human knowledge has undergone rapid changes occasioned by the interaction between different philosophies (world-views). These philosophies are a reflection of people's experiences which are formulated as knowledge systems (modes of knowledge production relative to particular communities) that inform the beliefs and practices of a people. As such, humanity having gone through so much since its beginnings and evolution (in the sense of human growth and development), that it is very difficult for us to reconstruct what we would consider as authentic local or indigenous knowledge systems that have not been affected, and more often than not, 'infected' by or with other forms as borrowed by choice or force. This is the story of the African continent in as far as its contact with the rest of the world is concerned. It therefore follows that it is a fallacy to claim an 'innocent' or 'virgin' African philosophy. Besides, lack of documentation of what we would call the African knowledge systems has negatively affected us to the extent that a lot has been 'transplanted' is put to use without the acknowledgement of its origins. And this iniquity continues unabated today. Just as pictures of 'needy' skinny children look into your face at major international airports, so it plays out even in the knowledge fields. Africa continues to be seen as a continent in need of assistance, even in knowledge systems. The greatest tragedy is that 'independent' Africa still looks outside, not into itself, for the solutions to the plethora of challenges it faces. How many African countries still live in need of a 'second liberation' especially from its leaders who look outside for solutions to their challenges?

## DEFINITION OF 'PERSON' IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

The other day, a young man died of cancer at the age of 13 years and willed that his body be cytotogenetically preserved so that he can be 'awakened' in the future should the cancer cure be discovered so that he can live his full life. His will, declared to his mother was contested in the courts of law whereby the judges granted his wish. This very expensive preservation as was granted will be paid for by his nation. We note that this cannot be in Africa—not that because less value is attached to life, but rather, due to limited resources to undertake such. Besides, in the African setting, death is but a phase in life at another

plane. Death is therefore accepted as a transformational experience that is accepted without fear. Human life is valued beyond mere physical existence.

In some countries of the world, depending on medical ethics and human rights approaches, an unborn foetus whatever the age has no rights to life unless determined by especially the mother. Abortion in this case, may be determined and demanded by the mother. In the African setting, the life of the unborn is firmly protected against termination by observing certain taboos through belief systems. At birth, even the placenta has its revered position since its disposal is often an elaborate process in some communities. This is because it is viewed as 'living' and a kind of 'twin' to the born child.

There are situations where members of a particular ethnic group view themselves in an exclusive manner when dealing with other ethnic groups. Due to limited knowledge and interactions between communities, an ethnic group may claim dominance, or even deny the existence of others. To such groups, killings and murders of others may be a way of 'cleansing' or 'purification.' In such cases, there are constructs that are used to define the 'other' as 'impersonal.'

### *PERSONHOOD*

In our use of the term *Personhood*, emphasis is laid on the quality of life, rights, dignity and respect that befits a human person. In this case, *Personhood* seeks to establish the sanctity of the human person; placing him at the right order and level among other creatures in the universe—as the principal actor who defines what the universe is in its intricate interrelatedness. Yes, we have a lot in common with other creatures, such as the chimpanzee which has been found to be closer to humans than any other creature in the genetic composition. We are social beings, just as other animals and insects are. We have emotions, knowledge and intelligence, just as some animals do—a dog may be said to be emotionally connected to its owner. Animals can and do make decisions, but it is humans that have the capacity to exercise higher forms of cognitive thought in rational manners. Animals may be trained to perform 'human' duties, but will still exhibit what humans would categorize as 'animalistic' behaviours. But humans may also, we may note, manifest such behaviours, but when this happens, they (humans) may be considered 'less' human with a lot of implications. It may be said of such that 'they have no heart,' or may be reduced to impersonal labels or objects. For such, the only explanation for unexpected, anti-social or deviant behaviour is that they are 'dead.' This means that they have ceased to exist in the land of the living—a death that is not defined in physical-bodily terms, but as the loss of *Personhood*.

*Personhood* transcends ability to speak, reason, have a language, having self-awareness and even remarkably similar genetic make-up as the case is with the chimpanzee or apes. Humans have knowledge of justice, ability for foresight, introspection and various emotional states. The self-awareness of humans sets them apart from other species in the universe; a self-awareness that communicates

interdependence with both the natural and supernatural world, which exalts humanity above all else.

Among African Bantu<sup>(5)</sup> languages, the most sublime identity one can ascribe to another is to call him/her a person. While this may be at first sight and a recognition of the physical or biological make-up, with time, one has to work hard to prove that he/she does not lose that identity. It is in this case that we have to note that *Personhood* is attained through socialization where identity is created. Where there is loss of identity, there is obvious depersonalisation through creation of other identities that refer to such individuals by what it is that they have done to lose their *Personhood*. In his exhaustive study of the concept of Personhood entertained by the Bantu peoples of Africa, Alexis Kagame,<sup>(6)</sup> a Rwandan philosopher and linguist, found that the Bantu generally think of a human person as consisting of a body, an animating force (which he describes metaphorically as "shadow"), a principle of intelligence, and finally, the heart, which is not thought of as a pump. Just like it is in English, if one becomes a murderer, a rapist, a thief, etc. such a person may not be referred to by a name which is believed to transmit Personhood. Such a person may be considered as 'heartless' for it is the 'heart' (not the biological organ) that defines a person. A 'heartless' individual can graduate into 'an animal' in this regard since deviance is intolerable. The Ashanti would state that whereas humans are endowed with conscious will, in a few occasions when drunk or misdirected by an evil spirit in certain limited situations will they manifest 'impersonal' and 'inhuman' behaviours (Williams, 1983: 1). Essentially, *Personhood* in the African context does not confer freedom upon individuals since they are 'bound' by societal values as 'chains' and 'privileges' in the normative 'do's' and 'don'ts.' It is these that make people human. Even in death one remains bound by these: if he has been an important person in life, his spirit continues to be revered and fed as he is expected to guide, guard and direct the living. If he dies a shameful death, his spirit has to be 'terminated' or 'killed' so that he does not return to haunt the living (Oruka & Masolo, 1983).

*Personhood*, to the African, is not something one is born with; it is something one has to work for and something at which one can fail. Furthermore, there are degrees of *Personhood*, and its lower gradations can shade off into nonexistence in the life of a human individual. Life then, on the African conception, is a struggle for *Personhood* since it is the given culture that constructs *Personhood*. African societies are, famously, communalistic. The individual is brought up, from the beginning, with a sense of belonging and solidarity with an extensive circle of kith and kin. The basis of this solidarity is a system of reciprocity in which each individual has obligations to a large set of other individuals. These are matched by rights owed him or her by the same number of individuals. Living amid the reality of this reciprocity, one soon begins to see him/herself as presupposing the group. This is the mainspring of the normative conception of a person. This binds individuals' fates. Individuals sacrifice their independence for the good (interdependence) of all. They are not called upon to make this great sacrifice, but are socialized to be and act

accordingly. The values, norms, beliefs and practices shape the behaviour and identity of the members of the community.

However, *Personhood* has both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Generally, in African thought, a person is considered as a combination of the mind, body and heart. Among these, it is the heart, the seat of the will and emotions which is considered central in everything. The mind is what enables individuals to engage in activities. This is derived from the brain which is the power of reasoning. The body is the material aspect which is visible. It is possible to say, among some Africans, that one is 'dead' even though he/she may be alive in material terms.

### *PERSONHOOD VIS-À-VIS PERSONALITY*

In discussing *Personhood* with specific reference to Africa, it should be considered as connoting 'humaneness' rather than 'humanness.' It is the attributes assigned that qualify one to be a 'person.' These attributes are culturally defined and may not be similar in practice across communities but communicate similar values. The common attributes of 'personality' in Africa are centred on relationship: cordiality, sharing, belonging, sacrifice, respect, celebration, etc. Isolationism, independence, individualism, are associated with persons with a 'bad heart.' In fact, a 'good heart' is what marks 'Personhood.'

Personality in the African setting has to do with how individuals respond and observe cultural norms, values and beliefs. Personality, in other words, is a reflection of particular attributes—whether good or bad. If one exhibits those attributes that ensure social stability, he/she is viewed as 'person.' Non-conformity to societal norms and values leads to being considered in non-personal terms by the very acts that define 'what' one is—uncooperative, thief, rapist, etc.

### *PERSONHOOD VIS-À-VIS GENDER*

Our times are characterised by diverse views on the subject of gender. Generally, the African perspective can easily be lost when discussing gender in terms of roles and responsibilities based on social constructs that are based on physiological and biological differentiation with the consequent categories of 'man' and 'woman' having attributes that define their relations. In this case, much of African view of society is patriarchal, whereby men are looked at as the main actors in matters of leadership and management. However, underneath this 'obvious' view is the fact that women are crucial determinants of men's decisions since they (women) are consulted in most cases. Women in most cases are viewed as the holders of the secret of life since they give birth and nurture people. They are therefore entrusted with some of the most important aspects of society where they act as custodians and transmitters of culture.

Men are considered to be the guardians of the society. They are the holders



of 'hard power' often exhibited in the duties and responsibilities as defined according to cultural norms. They are considered to be the 'owners' of most of the materials or properties. These they hold both through the family, clan and community as trustee; a responsibility they are expected to never betray since betrayal may carry a curse, feared for its negative impact spanning generations.

As those who wield 'muscle power,' men are expected to be the defenders of the community. When duty calls, they are expected to display capacity to handle and accomplish difficult tasks. In fact, it is an abuse for a man to be called 'woman' since womanhood implies 'softness' and 'easiness' in life, characteristics that they (women) are expected to have in order to qualify to be women.

Most traditional African societies differentiate and assign roles according to gender. However, this does not lead to social stratification, but rather, specialisation and complementarity, not necessarily in exclusive terms. This 'shared responsibility' (complementarity) leads to social stability. Avoidance of crossing lines of roles assigned to a particular gender is what ensures community cohesion devoid of conflicts arising from gender relations.

## PERSONHOOD AND VALUE OF LIFE

Among the Banyoro (Byaruhanga-Akiiki, 1982), a Bantu-speaking people of Uganda like in other African traditions and cultures, there is high value of human life. Whatever is done is for the maintenance of life. No one has power over life or death. Intentional killing (murder) is therefore considered a grave wrong; and whoever kills is equated to an animal (non-person). Such acts that dehumanise others depersonalise the individuals doing so. Humans come into the world having no choice of parents, the place where to be born, and the time to be born, may grow in a physical (biological) manner, reproduce or not, and as a must, have to die. At death, life is not terminated but transformed since the spirit does not die. *Kuzimu*, the underworld is the destiny of the person, which is a kind of migration or movement from one world to another. However, once gone, the person does not return in a physical form save through dreams and visions. It is also believed that someone in the spirit-world has more influence on the affairs of the living. If the dead person was good, his/her name is perpetuated through rituals like naming and sacrifices for continued good relationships. However, if someone was bad, his/her influence will likewise be bad; a serious inconvenience to the living. Such would demand appeasement. Alternatively at burial, elaborate rituals are undertaken to 'terminate' the influence of such a person on the living. There may never be someone in the family named after or in the memory of such a one. He/she ceases from the memory of the community; a kind of 'second death' in the modern language.

Therefore, one is enjoined to live at peace with others. The community through the family becomes the 'theatre' where the 'drama' of life is lived and experienced. There are sanctions to live by, defined in terms of norms and values. It is the

value that one places on these that determines success and failure in life, and the desire of everyone is to live life to the fullness. In this community, 'ubuntu' is what summarizes being or *Personhood*. One beyond existing is identified as having 'ubuntu' if he/she manifests positive attributes; attributes that are life-affirming like humanness and generosity.

Among the Baganda of Central Uganda, 'ubuntu bulamu' connotes the same concept as among the Banyoro to mean being humane, or what constitutes the essential nature of the human person. A person with such attributes will pursue dignity, practice compassion, seek harmony, have respect for all, and be tolerant, patient, caring and loving. He/she will place others before him/her and have interest in the welfare and preservation of individuals and the community at large. Such an individual will seek after integrity. All these values are learned in the family and are considered to reflect the type of family and community one has been brought up. Even in the midst of the rapid socio-cultural changes, it is presumed that these are attribute one cannot do away with.

However, if there is anything that has been most negatively affected in Africa, it is the value to human life. In spite of what we have discussed above, there seems to be less consideration for value for human life and therefore a denial of *Personhood*. Media reports and human rights organizations can attest to the absence of respect for human life. History and current affairs attest to the use of 'raw' power by governments to curtail freedoms of their nationals. It is countries in Africa that have the highest levels of democracy deficit. It is countries in Africa that reflect high levels of conflict with the resultant forced migrations and refugee crises. Coup d'états are a common reality, always characterized by large scale destruction of life and property. If we are to consider how most African government budget and plan for the welfare of their citizens, it will be found that key sectors in the social service like health and education received the least of the budgetary allocations. Lack of setting priorities right in a people-centred approach breeds discontent in the communities leading to social upheavals and conflicts. Most of these conflicts are national, sometimes taking on an ethnic divergence outlook like the 1994 Rwanda Genocide that led to an extermination of humanity. The international community looked on due to the 'strategic interests' of the West (America, France and Belgium, together with all others associated with them). However, Rwanda has risen from the ashes and pushed for an ideology that works for national reconstruction using indigenous resources that have inherent life values with emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation through truth-telling and asking for forgiveness.<sup>(7)</sup> Once individuals in communities have gone through the reconciliation process, healing is believed to begin to an indefinite period.

The social debt of the genocide in Rwanda is a reality that the country will take long to settle. Families as social units that define the most of the intimate relationships were destroyed. Religious institutions that are looked to as moral and ethical guides became hideout for ideological formations that betrayed the very faithful who shared belief systems and confessions. These are key social values centres that cannot have their impact quantified.

Another comparative case has been that of the Kony insurgency in Northern Uganda where the so-called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) for a period of over 20 years committed heinous crimes against unarmed civilians. The young and old were carried into captivity, the young and innocent were defiled through training as killing troops, both boys and girls were subjected to crimes beyond their ages to bear. Captive girls were forced into marriage, becoming child-mothers in the stages of their innocence, while others were sold into slavery, never to have any chance of ever returning home. Others were mutilated, while horrific acts of terror were enforced with zeal and unmatched determination by those in the rebel ranks. Tales of humanity at its lowest abound, and many still wonder whether those who carried out such activities had any humanity left in them. However, when windows opened for negotiations and peace talks with the rebels, it was generally acceptable to the people from the same region that these were but wayward people who needed forgiveness. In the event that there was owning up, rituals would be performed to reintegrate the perpetrators in the community where they would co-exist with their victims. Society has all the necessary mechanisms to counsel and dress the wounds so long as peace is desired. Revenge and retaliation are considered as similar sides of the same coin, which are supposed to be abhorred. All punishment is geared to correcting the aberrant members who should be brought in line with the social sanctions as tradition has determined. Even formal national laws are considered as not inked on stone but subject to revision for the peace and stability of the community.

It is evident from this discussion that in the African context, a human being derives his/her identity from the relevant culture in which he/she is born and bred. This makes *Personhood* a kind of historical and cultural artefact. This is the summative conclusion that can be made when reference is made to the various disciplines like Philosophy, Cultural Anthropology, Anthropology, Theology, and others that would consider the significance of the different perspectives one would encounter in the discussion of the position of humanity in the wider socio-cultural context. The African context has undergone many and diverse cultural changes from the time of its contact especially with the colonial legacy that still lives on through both governance and educational and religious sectors. The rate of industrialization, together with the resultant urbanization challenge the traditional cultural set-up and worldview. This calls for revision of the once cherished value systems as relationships are re-negotiated in terms of the new realities. For example, the discussion of *Personhood* in most African communities today will be overshadowed by European and Christian worldviews. This is occasioned by the education system that Africa has inherited from especially the West. All that is indigenous and informal in nature is not considered as trustworthy and foundational in giving focus and direction to the continent. However, it is evident that quite often, and especially after the failure of the 'borrowed' and adopted methodologies, there is a 'return' to the search for the enduring and traditional knowledge systems that are human-sustaining. How much longer this will be and is still a contentious matter.

Still it can be argued, that the Western construction of the person in

psychological terms has its own flaws in the African thinking. As Rose notes,

...modern Western societies are unusual in construing the person as such a natural locus of beliefs and desires, with inherent capacities, as the self-evident origin of actions and decisions, as a stable phenomenon exhibiting consistency across different contexts and times.... It is in these societies that psychology has been born as a scientific discipline, as a positive knowledge of the individual and particular way of speaking the truth about hums and acting upon them. Further or so it would appear, in these societies, human beings have come to understand and relate to themselves as 'psychological' beings, to interrogate and narrate themselves in terms of a psychological 'inner life' that holds the secrets of their identity, which they are to discover and fulfil, which is the standard against which the living of an 'authentic' life is to be judged (Rose, 1998: 22).

As seen before, the communal emphasis in matters of life and being in the African setting finds itself set against the modern trends and knowledge systems. Individualism threatens our very existence as interdependence characteristically marks our essential nature as social beings. It is the individualistic tendencies, rooted in the imported worldviews that account for the gross lack of respect for life in Africa today in all aspects and at all levels. It is the de-construction of all cultural attributes and values that creates humans devoid of humanness, respect, love, integrity, honour; all life-affirming and sustaining values. This is not the essential African mind that values *Personhood* as experienced in the community. It, indeed, is time to get back to the basics of life, life lived and experienced in the community; the kind of life that recognises existence beyond the self and individual, affirming the view that our individual identities are a construct of the community, and our being depends on how we relate with the immediate milieu. Much as it (*Personhood*) is the need for Africa, this is the need for humanity on the globe. More than ever before, humanity is living on the edge. World over, fear among people is not without but within. Reduced and re-defined in material and physical terms, life is reduced to mere existence devoid of meaning and significance. The 'person' in this regard has value in terms of what he/she can do, which calls for 'performance' and 'duty' for 'self-actualization' rather than community wellbeing. The breakdown of the social institutions and organizations that would enhance human life and value threaten the very existence of individuals and community.

In everything, the concept of *Personhood* which plays out well in the different cultures and communities of Africa needs further study as a possible panacea for a world devoid of human value and respect for life in a holistic manner. Different communities and cultures of the world (including Africa), whatever level of 'development' need to interrogate their ethos in relation to this life-affirming concept, most prevalent on the African continent.

## NOTES

- (1) Culture is understood as the natural ecology of human.
- (2) Socialization is understood as the process through which individuals acquire knowledge and skills that qualify them to participate as members of a particular group or society.
- (3) This is the learning and acquisition of cultural norms and values by belonging and practicing them. Human behaviour is learned, it is not genetically transmitted.
- (4) This is commonly attributed to J.S. Mbiti seminal work *African Religion and Philosophy* (Mbiti, 1970) where he argues that African life is lived in a community of belonging and identity. As such, individuals are considered as members of the great community without whom they cannot be. This is the communitarian aspect of Africans.
- (5) The root 'NTU' means 'BEING' as the source and ground of all forms of being and existence. The derivative verb 'Obuntu' or 'Buntu' among the Bantu of Uganda is the quintessence of authentic human existence. It signifies the inner state of a person which is fully humanized. It stands for the good desirable qualities in human beings: being good, humane, thoughtful, considerate, kind, wise, and godly (religious), generous, polite, mature, and virtuous; the manifestation of positive and life-giving actions.
- (6) He was a Mututsi Roman Catholic priest who extensively wrote on the Rwandan culture and philosophy in pre-and colonial Rwanda, outside the dominant writings by the Europeans on the same.
- (7) The Gacaca Courts have been credited for having done much more in restoring social relationships among Banyarwanda. Though informal, these courts were strengthened through formal procedures; a case that calls for attention to local solutions for some national issues so long as the community cohesion is desired.

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